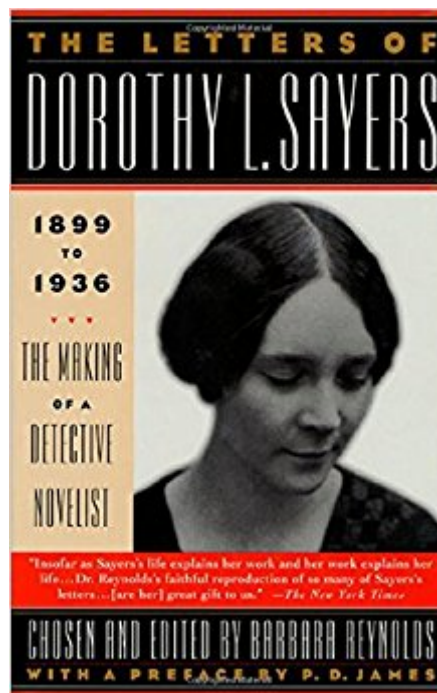




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The Letters Of Dorothy L. Sayers: 1899-1936: The Making Of A Detective Novelist



Synopsis

A collection of letters written by the great mystery novelist to friends and family provides revealing glimpses of Sayers's childhood, undergraduate career at Oxford, secret love affair and illegitimate child, mystery writing, and more.

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Customer Reviews

C.S. Lewis suggested that Dorothy Sayers's letters would one day be recognized as among the finest epistles produced in the 20th century. In fact, this first volume, covering the years from Sayers's early childhood to the later years of personal tragedy and literary triumph, shows a broad-ranging talent and reveals a rich life full of language study, poetry, and books. Barbara Reynolds, author of the celebrated *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul*, has selected a cross section of letters to represent the full spectrum of Sayers's expressions and emotions. Most troubling are those desperate letters to John Cournos, the novelist's lover and the man who ultimately jilted her. Also fascinating are her notes to her illegitimate son John Anthony (fathered by Bill White, a "car salesman and motor engineer"), messages expressing deep love that are, simultaneously, touched with the restraint of a mother held distant by social convention. Beyond these very personal moments, however, one traces the budding and then flowering of a literary career. Sayers's years at Oxford and after are peppered with references to her reading, snippets of her writing, and records of her travels in France and elsewhere. As P.D. James writes in the preface to the volume: "by the end of 1936, when this volume ends ... she could look back on half-a-lifetime

of courageous living and ultimate achievement.... The enjoyment with which I read this first volume of letters is matched only by my happy expectation of pleasure to come." --Patrick O'Kelley

Reynolds has written two biographical works on the English detective novelist Sayers (1893-1957) and also completed the translation of Dante's *Inferno* begun by Sayers at the end of her life. This book is the first of two volumes of Sayers's correspondence, selected and edited by Reynolds, with an introduction by P.D. James. The volume begins with Sayers's childhood letters to friends and family, follow her to the Godolphin School and to Oxford, and then chronicle her years of teaching, working in an advertising agency, bearing a child out of wedlock, getting married, and starting a writing career. Readers of Sayers's fiction (e.g., *Murder Must Advertise*, 1933) will enjoy learning about events in her life that made their way into her fiction, and they will not be surprised to find that Sayers was quite a literate and lucid letter writer. Recommended for literature collections and where there is an interest in the writer. Denise Johnson, Bradley Univ. Lib., Peoria, Ill. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The letters of even the best of letter writers can provide only a limited view of the person who wrote them. The Self can rarely focus accurately upon its own existence, memories fade and are distorted, self-explanations are at the mercy of Self-Interest. Nevertheless, an acute intelligence, a self-probing consciousness, a mind filled with some of the best work done by others, a willingness or necessity to explain itself to some others and to itself, can produce a world of impressions with magnetic appeal. That is what I found in these letters of Dorothy Sayers as she grows from childhood through to adult maturity. Refracted through her mind and experiences, we have here articulate documents retailing images of the early twentieth century world as experienced by a girl-child growing up in a world in which she and others of her ilk are finding themselves more resolutely in a man's world than ever in recent history yet still heavily dependent upon others like themselves who have been successful or are becoming successful. Some contradictions in Sayers self-told story are pointed out by the editor/biographer (who does an excellent job of providing context): the desperate need she expresses for love, marriage and motherhood and her inability to manage a career without sacrificing herself to the demands of love from others, her unwillingness to risk having a child by the man she loves but not from the man she doesn't love. There are a plethora of these heavy subjects, the pains of earning a living through her writing, the arrangements necessary for a mother who feels she must not reveal that fact to any but those for whom such knowledge is required, yet, her willingness to inform the man she loved, who did not want her to

have children but married another after saying he would never marry. Her eagerness to pursue a correspondence with the ex-lover now married, her hostility toward him and, yet, her willingness to discuss how he could help get her some man. There are also many happy, light-hearted letters, her achievements in school and at Oxford, her poetry, plays, performances at every occasion given her, her deep enjoyment in music and the drama, poetry and the classics, her many friends and her father and mother. Cutting it short: this was a book which provided me with many pleasures, it was also a book from which I learned much of what the life of a clergyman's daughter born at the end of the 19th Century was like. I can commend it to all literate readers; most certainly it is not a book directed at Feminists or any other subsection of the population, it is a book for anyone to whom the written word can communicate thought and feelings.

This is the woman who created one of my most favorite characters in literature. Interesting to watch how she developed over time.

Excellent condition

I wish I knew her. She was interesting. That picture on the book fly is nice. Pretty girl. I'm trying to figure out why she made herself look old and ugly. Why should I bother? Because she's a great writer. With her persona, how did she come up with Peter and Harriet, a whole family. (Jill Paton Walsh hasn't done a bad job either.)

Dorothy L. Sayers is known to many readers as the creator of the Wimsey detective novels. Written in the 1920s and 30s, these books earned Sayers a living and a great deal of respect in the genre, but they are not enough to know about this brilliant and complex woman. Sayers was born in 1893 in Oxford, England. She was one of the first women to be granted a degree from Oxford University and earned her living at an advertising agency for some years, and then by her writing. Besides the detective novels and short stories, she wrote poetry, drama, essays and literary criticism, and translated Dante's *Divina Commedia*, a project which was incomplete at her death in 1957. In her late twenties she had a love affair that ended badly, and from a "rebound relationship" with another man she became pregnant; the child was raised by her cousin and the truth of his parentage was not known until after Sayers' death. In her early thirties she married a journalist who became disabled, leaving her with the ongoing responsibility of earning the family living. Sayers was from her earliest years a prolific and entertaining correspondent. This first volume of her letters is presented

by Barbara Reynolds, who is Sayers' god-daughter, literary collaborator and biographer. The annotations add enormous clarity and value to the collection so that it could be enjoyed by a reader with very little knowledge of Sayers' life and times. From a six-year-old's domestic concerns, the letters go on to cover Dorothy's successes and enthusiasms at boarding school and Oxford. As her writing career begins to develop there is a fascinating look at the publishing world from an author's perspective. Wimsey fans: there is a wealth of background on the novels and short stories. The letters to her lover John Cournos are the most poignant, and her ongoing interest in her son is a constant theme. Sayers' letters are breezy, literate, and ninety-miles-per-hour. While the entire book is wildly quotable, I include just a few examples of her style. To her former lover: "I kept your letter for a week before I read it, because I do so hate getting worked up--it's such headache work going to the office after howling all night..." To her publisher in London: "Having first assured myself that it was NOT your offices which the crane fell through last night (which might have seemed an ill omen, had it occurred), I proceed to enclose ..." To her publisher cataloging the renovation of her flat: "The Cat is investigating the mysterious cavities between the joists of the flooring, with a view to getting nailed down under the floor, if possible ... I am trying to look ... like Dido building Carthage, and hoping (as I daresay she did) that the hammering will soon be over. Life is very wonderful. We are doing our best." Dorothy L. Sayers: hard-working woman in a world designed for men, passionate about education and religion, a fine writer and an inspiring correspondent, challenged in her personal life. My respect for her and her work is enormous. If you are interested in learning more about this prodigious woman, you'll find a treasure trove in this first volume of her letters. Linda Bulger, 2008

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